Does God set his servants on fire?

(Iver Larsen, January 2010, revised November 2026)

Heb 1:7 is an interesting exegetical challenge, because it is one of those rare cases where *the vast majority of translations seem to have gone astray*. Let me start by quoting some English versions:

KJV: Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire.
RSV: Who makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.
NIV: He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire.
TEV: God makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.
NLT: messengers swift as the wind, and servants made of flaming fire.
CEV: I change my angels into wind and my servants into flaming fire.

NJB: **appointing the winds his messengers and flames of fire his servants**.

The last one is different from the others for very good reasons.

For those who know Greek, let me quote the Greek text:

hO POIWN TOUS AGGELOUS AUTOU PNEUMATA
(Thew one making/using his angels/messengers winds/spirits)
KAI TOUS LEITOURGOUS AUTOU PUROS FLOGA
(And his servants flame of fire.)

The passage is a word for word quote from the LXX version of Psalm 104:4 (103:4) with a very minor adjustment of the last two words from "flaming fire" to "flame of fire". The last expression with the Greek noun FLOX is more common than the corresponding verb FLEGW. FLOX (a flame) occurs 7 times in the NT and 61 times in the LXX, whereas FLEGW (to flame) does not occur in the NT, but 22 times in the LXX.

The flaming fire is associated with the awesome presence of God as on Mt. Sinai and also with punishment. In Rev 1:14 Jesus is described as having eyes like a flame of fire.

It is at times associated with lightning or the fire that results when lightning strikes. For instance:
Isa 29:6 "the LORD Almighty will come with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire." It is likely that the thunder and flames of a devouring fire (lightning) are connected by chiasm.
Isa 30:30 "The LORD will cause men to hear his majestic voice and will make them see his arm coming down with raging anger and consuming fire, with cloudburst, thunderstorm and hail."
Isa 66:15 "See, the LORD is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire." (Another chiasm).
Ps 105:32 "He gave them hail for rain, and lightning that flashed through their land." (RSV)
Ps 105:32 "He gave them hail for rain, [and] flaming fire in their land! (KJV)
Notice how "flaming fire" was correctly translated by "flashing lightning".
Jer 23:29 "Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces" (Although the Hebrew here has only "fire", the LXX has "flaming fire" the exact same phrase as in Ps 104:4). The image suggests lightning.

It is a fairly common theme in the OT for God to use the elements of nature in fighting against his enemies. When Barak and Deborah defeated Sisera's army by the wadi of Kishon, the army was swept away by torrential rains and a surge of water through the river. See Judges 5:20-21. In this

kind of attack from heaven, the thunderstorm, the lightning and the rain combines to a serious force against an army that depends on chariots that can get stuck in the mud.

So, the "winds" referred to in Heb 7:1 and Ps 104:4 must be the thunderstorm that God is using as his "messengers" to combat the enemy. Likewise, the "flames of fire" must refer to lightning and possibly accompanying fires that go with a thunderstorm and also are used by God as his "servants" to combat the enemy. The NIV study note for Ps 104:4 says: "The winds and lightning bolts of the thunderstorm, here personified as the agents of God's purposes (see 148:8, cf. 103:21)."

The interesting thing about the translation of Heb 1:7 is that everybody agree that this is a quote from Ps 104:4. So, how do these same translations render Ps 104:4? For ease of comparison, I am copying the rendering of Heb 1:7 from above as the first line. The second line is Ps 104:4:

KJV: Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire.
KJV: Who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire

RSV: Who makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.
RSV: who makest the winds thy messengers, fire and flame thy ministers.

NIV: He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire.
NIV: He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants.

TEV: God makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.
TEV: You use the winds as your messengers and flashes of lightning as your servants.

NLT: messengers swift as the wind, and servants made of flaming fire.
NLT: The winds are your messengers; flames of fire are your servants.

CEV: I change my angels into wind and my servants into flaming fire.
CEV: The winds are your messengers, and flames of fire are your servants.

NJB: appointing the winds his messengers and flames of fire his servants.
NJB: appointing the winds your messengers, flames of fire your servants.

It is not clear why some versions say "your" rather than "his" for Ps 104:4, because the BHS text has "his". I assume it is a translation decision to avoid the poetic shifts between 2. and 3. person in this psalm. In any case, this is not significant, since the reference to God is clear enough.

It is interesting that *only KJV and NJB* are *consistent* in giving the *same* translation of the Hebrew and LXX text. The KJV is clearly wrong, and it does not make sense. The other versions of Ps 104:4 make good sense in the context, since it talks about the power of God as the ruler of all creation, using the winds as his chariots and the thunderstorm as his weapon. I think the TEV did very well for Ps 104:4, but made nonsense out of Heb 1:7.

Why is NJB (New Jerusalem Bible) alone in making a translation that makes sense and recognizes that the author of Hebrews is quoting this Psalm, intending the same meaning? The point in Hebrews 1:7 is that the angels are not up there at the same level as God or Jesus (and not to be worshiped). Even the thunderstorm and lightning are used by God as his "angels", i.e. messengers. "Jesus is far above the angels" is the major theme of this passage in Hebrews.

Let us look at exegetical summaries and commentaries. The Exegetical Summary published by SIL gives two exegetical options:

1. The articular nouns TOUS AGGELOUS 'the angels' and TOUS LEITOURGOUS 'the servants' are objects of hO POIWN 'the one making', and the anarthrous [accusative] nouns PNEUMATA 'winds' and FLOGA 'flame[s]' are predicates [Alf, Blm, EGT, GNC, Hu, Lg, Ln, My, NTC, TH, TNTC, WBC; all versions except NJB];
2. 'Winds' and 'flames' are the objects, and 'the angels' (= 'messengers') and 'the ministers' are predicates [NIGTC; NJB]: who makes winds his messengers and flames of fire his servants. The Septuagint cannot carry the other interpretation [NIGTC].

One brave commentator (NIGTC) and one brave translation (NJB). NIGTC is Paul Ellingworth's excellent commentary on Hebrews.

The UBS Handbook on Hebrews was written by Nida and Ellingworth in 1983. It says for Heb 1:7: "The Hebrew text of Psalm 104.4 may mean either
(a) God makes winds and flames into his messengers and servants; (option 2 above) or
(b) God turns his servants into winds and flames. (option 1 above). The Greek text can mean only (b)."

Paul Ellingworth's commentary was published in 1993, and it says:
"The meaning of the quotation is ambiguous in the MT, which may mean either:
(a) who makes winds/spirits his angels/messengers, or
(b) who makes his angels into winds.
The LXX cannot mean (b)."

The reader ought to be confused by now. The Handbook by Nida and Ellingworth says that the Greek text of Hebrews 1:7 ***can only*** mean (b), the same as option 1. Ellingworth says 10 years later that the Greek text of the LXX ***cannot*** mean (b), the same as option 1.

But the Greek text is exactly the same. I would say that both statements are overstatements. The Greek text is open to both interpretations, and what it can or cannot mean is the subjective evaluation of the exegete. If we take context and common sense into account, there is no doubt in my mind that Nida (and Ellingworth) was wrong in 1983 and Ellingworth right in 1993, and that the NJB gives the correct interpretation of Heb 1:7, although not a very clear translation.

Let me again quote the Greek text:

hO POIWN TOUS AGGELOUS AUTOU PNEUMATA
KAI TOUS LEITOURGOUS AUTOU PUROS FLOGA

Literally: He who makes/uses winds [as] his messengers
and [a] flame of fire [as] his servants.

Greek has a flexible word order so that one cannot know by the order what phrase is the object and what is the predicate. The order in this case is probably influenced by the Hebrew word order, since the LXX here is an extremely word-for-word Hebraic-sounding rendering. Nor does the case marking solve the issue, since both the objects and the predicates are in the accusative.

That the Greek words for winds and flame are without the definite article probably reflects that the Hebrew words have no articles here. But it also agrees with the indefinite nature of "winds" and "lightning". The text is not talking about specific winds and a specific bolt of lightning, but of wind and lightning in general. God can use a wind as his messenger, and lightning as his servant. It is certainly possible to understand the Greek text in Heb 1:7 and in the LXX in sense (a), option 2. If we did not have context to go by, both the Hebrew and Greek text might be open to both interpretations, but the context is decisively against sense (b), option 1 in both Ps 104:4 and in Heb 1:7.

The literal rendering "make" doesn't make much sense in English. The idea is that God commissions or uses winds as his messengers and lightning as his servants in the context of war against his enemies or punishment of his enemies. Just think of Elijah who called down fire/lightning from heaven (2 Ki 1:10), and the "sons of thunder" who were tempted to do the same (Luk 9:54, cf. also Rev 13:13 and 20:9).

My suggestion for translation would be something like the TEV for Ps 104:4, but the same in both places (except possibly a "your" in the psalm and a "his" in Hebrews.)

A footnote is needed in Heb 1:7 to explain the relationship between "messengers" and "angels", unless the receptor language uses the same word for both as both Hebrew and Greek do.